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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the American educational system as a quiet and nondeliberate destroyer of the adolescent's spirit in terms of stifling the development of cognitive, social, cultural, and intellectual growth. This phenomenon has been produced by the content, structure, and teaching methodology used in schools, beginning with fourth grade and continuing throughout junior and senior high schools, and into undergraduate university programs. Problem areas highlighted are: (1) a static academic curriculum with little relevance to the real world, (2) a rigid and inflexible policy of school operation based on a model of managerial efficiency, and (3) an attitude of distrust and hostility toward the student body. The paper concludes that if the student is not helped to become aware of himself as an individual, through education, the educational apparatus is merely grooming slaves and conditioning them to accept whatever conditions of life happen to come their way. (CS)

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BOREDOM TRANSCENDED:

ADOLESCENT SURVIVAL IN THE SUBURBAN HIGH SCHOOL

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BOREDOM TRANSCENDED: ADOLESCENT SURVIVAL IN THE SUBURBAN HIGH SCHOOL

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One of the major effects of our educational system is the deadening of human consciousness. The quiet and non-deliberate destruction of the human spirit in terms of closing off the development of cognitive, social, cultural and intellectual growth is remarkably achieved by our public school system. This phenomenon is produced by the content, structure and teaching methodology commencing with the latter part of elementary school, approximately fourth grade (9 years old) and continuing throughout Junior high school, senior high and the undergraduate university program.

The end result of this non-deliberate, softly brutal system is the literal death of intellectual and creative excitment during those years which are the most cognitively receptive for the development of abstract and performance processes. The empirical data indicates that the cerebral processing of information and the individuals ability to integrate conceptually and respond creatively are extraordinarily present during these preadolescent and adolescent years. Yet, what we have in effect designed is an educational apparatus which is highly successful in suppressing the natural intellectual growth processes during the most formative years of cognitive and creative synthesis. We have, in essence, designed and continued to support, an educational process which is strongly anti-intellectual and anti-scientific in terms of the dominant and dysfunctional approach to the learning process.

The schools function not as what some have termed a social prison and others a factory producing subservient and docile products, rather the schools operation is carefully designed to provide a non-involved, disinterested quest for mediocrity. The purpose of this system, in an unwritten and thoughtless kind of way, is to nurture obesiance, fear, and

intellectual and creative passivity towards those behaviors and activities which excite and stimulate the growth of cognitive consciousness. The schools have been remarkably effective in their central task,that of destroying human potential for abstract thought and creative consciousness.

At every level of the educational system with the exception of kindergarten through grade three, the intellectual and creative growth of the cognitive process has become a dead end. The little red school house of today, with all of the expensive technology, advance teacher certification, elaborate architectural palaces and vast public expenditure of funds, is an extraordinarily boring place to be for most students. The present educational apparatus brilliantly succeeds in turning off the great potential for learning which characterized the adolescent years.

The schools have been critized for producing allieniation, and in the language and romantic nihilism of the counter culture of creating 'death at an early age'. They have been attacked as brutal, inhumane prisons of the spirit and as promoting social maladjustment and the absence of mental health. However, in very few of the interviews with adolescents from a wide variety of school systems were the factors of alienation, imprisonment, maladjustment or poor health in any way significant factors. The significant and repeating theme was that of dullness and boredom with the school experience. experience.*

On a national basis our society is marked by an absence of leadership, leadership that is with a vestige of individual integrity and the ability to think independently. The schools play a major role in developing these social and intellectual models. The present neighborhood school carefully reinforces cognitive passivity towards the development of

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* Ninety five students were interviewed in seven different suburban high schools.

individual initiative and creative alternatives. The school provides an enviornment of non-stimulation except for the social interaction between the young people in the school. Hundreds of thousands of high school youth turn to the world of part-time work in the nature of 20 to 30 hours a week, not only because of the material advantages, but because these activities provide an emotional, social, and intellectual outlet which are far more real, and far more engaging for the human spirit than the dreary, boring life of the public school classroom.

This non-learning system in terms of intellectual and creative growth, is carefully fostered by the very nature of teacher selection and training within colleges of education. Colleges of education, especially at the more prestigious university levels, are committed not to the science of learning and teaching, but rather to notions of scholarship that are wholly divorced from the realities of the culture of public school life. The game plan within these colleges is to develop graduate degree programs and insulate themselves as far as possible from direct involvement with public school activities. The career reinforcement system pays off those professionals who produce the greatest bulk of refereed research. There is a negative relationship between the purpose of this research and any pragmatic committment to radically overhauling the deadening effect of public school education. This is in spite of the fact that most professors of education as well as their colleagues in the liberal arts disciplines, are cognizant of the reality of the educational wasteland both within the public schools and the universities. What they share in common is personal indifference and apathy toward the brutalizing aspects of our non-educational system.

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In all of the recent romantic criticisms of public education, a major point has been underemphasized. Those schools located in the most stable economic and social areas of our cities and suburbs have been reasonably efficient in terms of the purposes for which they are socially designated. They have developed an educational model from fourth grade through senior high school which progressively limits and suppresses the process of learning. Granting some exceptional schools and the effects of more intellectualized parents upon their children, one can discern an educational model for adolescents which has many common features.

First, there is a curriculum which is primarily structured for those preparing for university work. Major alternative curriculum paths such as business, trade, creative arts and the general labor force are rarely viewed as valid choices. It is assumed that more academic education is better than less education, regardless of the quality of the input. Second, there is the rigidity and inflexibility of the general school operation. The system is generally conducted within a military or business formula for managerial efficiency. The system is not built upon the most effective learning theory models, rather it is structured and managed in order to maximize control, student passivity and suppression of individual student liberty. Third, the attitude of distrust and hostility toward the student body is an important factor in the overall culture of the student's life. The students are permitted little in the way of personal freedom. Their every movement and minute in the building is monitored. They are often treated with suspicion and distrust by school authorities, teachers and the business community around the schools. As one student said during the interviews 'If we are treated like babies,

we act like babies.' The general attitude is one of little individual respect and the rejection of specialized concerns and interests. As Clover Linton has indicated:

> When my children were young I went thru an emotional experience each year at their school's Christmas concert, and I never quite understood my reaction. Here were all these kids lined up on the stage, backed by the stunning Christmas ornaments they had made out of lids from tin cans. The painted discs swayed and turned as all the little voices joined to sing 'Away in the Manger' and 'Oh Little Town of Bethlehem.' I still don't know why I cried each year as I watched and heard them, each one doing his very best, giving all they had to give to the assembled parents and rewarding their teachers with a sturdy performance.
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> I was seeing one of the ways that school can launch ambition and nourish the heart at the same time. And perhaps I wept because this marvellous combination of teaching almost always ends by the time the children reach the fourth grade. After that time, all those long years--4 more in grade school and 4 in high school, as Camus has mourned,'The cry of the mind is exhausted by its own rebellion.' And too often many high school students regard their learning experience as an unloving crock of shit.
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> Instead of nourishment for the mind and spirit, they must 'do their time' surrounded by an atmosphere of distrust, regimentation and suspicion. In one large high school in the western suburbs, the students asked the principal why the school had a closed campus policy. And his answer was, incredibly, that the townspeople didn't want the kids around the streets at lunch time, taking up space in

the local hamburger joints and perhaps raising other kinds of hell. How's that for a self-image for a teenager--to be regarded as a pariah dog by his own community, when instead he should be seeing himself as la vraie chose, a REAL SOMEBODY.

And how about the several high schools where the kids are allowed 28 minutes for lunch. I don't know for sure, but I think perhaps the prisoners at Cook County Jail are given more time than that to eat like human beings--meaning they don't have to bolt their food after standing in line, and there's a little time for civilized conversation. Twenty-eight minutes does not provide respite from the marathon dash from a physics class on the first floor, to a locker on the third floor, to physical ed. session in the fieldhouse --to be run in 5 minutes--and if you're late for class you go to the office*.

The lack of freedom within the high school is a formidable conditioning factor in the effective destruction of individual personal growth in a cognitive and creative sense. As Philip Cusick[1] has written in Inside High School:

The first consciously intended effect---is that students are denied freedom of activity. They may not leave the building between 8:10 and 2:30, except for a school approved activity; they must adhere to the routine and obey its supporting rules and regulations....A second effect is that the students are massed, and a third and closely related, reinforcing effect is that they are undifferentiated. The

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* Mrs.Clover Adele Linton

routine and the batch processing keep them constantly in the company of one another, and while there, the vertical organization (of authority) rules and regulations, and the doctrine of adolescent inferiority serve to have them all treated alike, regardless of class, sequence, or academic rank. (p.210) ...If some, or even many, do not have the substance of an education, no one will ever know: they at least have the assumption of one.'(p. 209)

The nature of the structured curriculum, the short periods, the constant flow from one classroom and subject to another, the disciplined and militarized aspect of the students' life tends to preclude any emotional involvement in intellectual or creative endeavor. Where this involvement occurs it is not generally a legitimate part of the academic credit and graduation ritual. Hence, for approximately nine years, five years of elementary and four of high school, intensive affective involvement in the learning process is aversively reinforced.

The emphasis is on the efficient management of 2,000 to 6,000 adolescents, on processing and controlling a vast community of young people in the most expeditious manner. The effects of this precision monitoring and the subordination of individual interests probably creates negative attitudes toward intellectual and creative endeavor, learning in an academic sense, and schooling in general.

There are also the cognitive and behavioral expectations delivered by the teachers in the high school. Granting exceptions, it is common practice for teachers in stable, affluent economic areas to give homework assignments for every academic class meeting. If these assignments were carried out the student would spend two to three hours an evening studying

for the following day.

The reality is that a small percentage of the students actually put in the expected homework time. It is common practice for the teacher to move along chapter by chapter in the assigned text at a rapid pace. so that the text is 'covered' by the end of the term. Very frequently, however, the students have not read the text, nor do they have any substantive understanding of the material presented.

The ever increasing amount of material to be covered creates a formalized classroom environment, where the teacher lectures, and questions the students, while at the same time many of the students create counter attack strategies to lessen the dull and boring didactic atmosphere of the learning process. They devise numerous techniques for beating the system, for pretending to know, asking irrelevant questions, changing the topic, easing the teacher into his personal anecdotal treasures, and finally, assuming that deceit, manipulation and conmanship are the essence of the school survival game.

As one student said during my interviews--when questioned about missing a week of her history class-- 'It was like a television soap opera, you could tune in anywhere and not miss a thing.'

Another top student said, 'We had been assigned the play, Julius Caesar, over the weekend. I don't think anyone read it by Monday's class; but the teacher always calls on me, and it lessens the boredom to ask and answer as many questions as I can. It's kind of a game, and I always win.'

The most rewarding part of the school environment for the students

is the opportunity to be together with their friends. It is not uncommon for students who have been suspended from classes for a few days to spend their free time hanging around the school so they can be with their friends. The academic, the bookish. the intellectual and the creative aspects of the learning environemnt are rarely mentioned or indicated as high interest areas by the students.

In the end there is a gross lack of substantive information about most all areas of the society in which they will spend the rest of their lives. Further, the interest in cognitive development, reading, critical awareness, and individual growth of consciousness has been effectively turned off. The adolescents have not been programmed, or silenced; they have simply been aversively conditioned on a long term basis, not only cognitively, but in terms of self awareness, personal growth and human maturity. The system, in its more affluent outposts, has extraordinarily short changed them in most every area of individual personal growth.

As Dr. Offer[2] indicated in his study of normal adolescent boys:

> The teachers who were respected the most by faculty and students alike were the coaches and the leaders in the sports activities. The teachers who were leaders of the intellectual courses---were rarely mentioned as meaningful figures for the adolescents... The general attitude toward teachers was negative. Rarely did a student say that an ideal teacher would resemble his math teacher... or someone he had just seen that week. We had the inpression that the students wanted to feel that learning could be enjoyable and that somehow they are conditioned to overlook this aspect of education. (p.44)

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As I listened to individual adolescents talking about their classroom experiences, one thing become very clear. Very little, if anything in their school experience related to the real world, or to their ultimate place in it. No one had taken the time to discuss their potential as a human being, or as a citizen in the community, the state, their city, the country or the world. The myopic focus of the classroom, reduces the function of the student to that of a sponge soaking up the distillation of revised and boring textbooks, learning formulas long ago discarded, meaningless daily schedules, rituals and administratively convenient routines.

Education which leads to wisdon and continuous maturation must certainly include helping the student to become aware of himself as an individual. Without this awareness, we are merely grooming slaves, conditioning them to accept whatever conditions of life happen to come their way -- no disquieting questions, no standing up to shout injustice, no troublesome thinking through to a conclusion perhaps different from the conclusion drawn up by someone else.

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